

# A NATURALIST IN THE NORTH-WEST HIMALAYA

BY

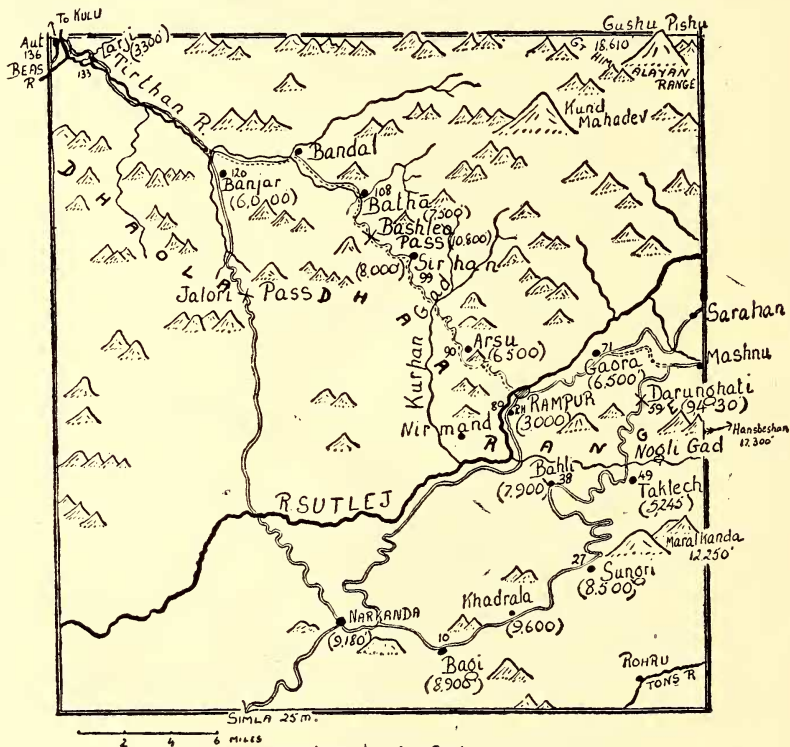
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PART I

(With a text map and two plates)

## NARKANDA TO KULU BY THE BASHLEO PASS

My original intention had been to travel as far as Charang beyond the Indian Kailas, return down the Sutlej to Rampur and then to cross into Kulu over the Bashleo Pass. Circumstances, however, were against me and I had to cut out the more ambitious part of this



programme and proceed direct from Darunghati to Larji, omitting the journey into Kunawar.

When I set out from Narkanda early on the morning of April 27th to cover the short stage to Bagi, spring had hardly touched these northern slopes of Hatu. The snows had been both heavy and late

and much was still lying in the forest. Though the rhododendrons (*R. arboreum*) were scarlet with blossom there were almost no other flowers to be seen and the deciduous trees were only just beginning to burst into leaf. Bird song was noticeably absent and the forest was very silent.

Bagi bungalow, renowned in days gone by for its good fare, had fallen on evil times, for it furnished me with two of the worst meals I have ever eaten. I was glad to leave it early the next day.

The road to Sungri, running along the southern side of a long ridge, found spring much more advanced. Pale purple primulas (*P. denticulata* and *petiolaris*) were in full bloom beneath the forest trees, whilst violets (*V. patrinii* and *serpens*) and gentians (*G. argentea*) brightened the grassy roadside. The white drooping racemes of a species of *Prunus* (*P. padus*) and the scarlet of rhododendrons gave colour to the forest. Beyond Khadralla a dwarf purple iris (*I. kumaonensis*?) was massed on the hill slopes.

Some three miles from Bagi I caught a glimpse of a small red tail-less object scuttling across the road, and down the side of a culvert. On looking over I saw a pika, or mouse hare (*Ochotona roylei*), staring up at me with the greatest interest (for they are the most inquisitive of creatures), an interesting find at this low altitude (9,200')<sup>1</sup>, as they are dwellers among the rocks of the high mountains above the tree line. Little is known of their winter habits and whether they hibernate in their alpine home or migrate to lower regions with the onset of winter is uncertain. This then was a scrap of evidence in support of the latter view.

From here until I arrived at Bahli the following day the journey was uneventful. The dak bungalow at Sungri was occupied by Lady Parmar, the Medical Director of Himachal Pradesh, who was undertaking a most strenuous official tour of the hills, and I had to make do with accommodation in a somewhat squalid subsidiary bungalow further down the hill. I was indebted, however, to Lady Parmar for an excellent dinner.

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The chief object of my trip was to make a brief survey of game in the higher regions of Himachal Pradesh. Although I had to omit that part of my programme which would have taken me through the Great Himalayan Range, this was not a tragedy as it gave me a longer time in the Upper Kulu Valley which is inhabited by a similar fauna, only more richly. Eventually I covered a fair part of the latter area and the line of the Dhaoladhar Range from Darunghati to Larji.

This range is rich in game between the Sulej and Hansbeshan, but further north-west, though the species are the same, it is less abundant. About the Upper Kulu Valley something will be stated later.

Here attention should be drawn to the fact that, while a stroll through a rich jungle in the Peninsula or on the plains or in the foothills of Northern India, is sure to reveal at least some of the larger

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<sup>1</sup> In Kashmir they are commonly found at this elevation in summer.—Eds.

game, and with luck much may be seen, this is far from the case in the high hills. In the course of a long walk through forest or a protracted scramble among the high crags and meadows above the tree line the sight of any animal whatsoever may be accounted as extremely fortunate, though game birds may be in plenty. This is partly because of the great difficulty of the terrain, partly because of the remarkable wariness of hill animals—why they are so much more timid than animals on the plains is difficult to understand as this hill country affords them great protection—and partly because of the thickness of the forests, but it is also undoubtedly due to the fact that there is much less big game on the hills than in the lower jungles. Perhaps the difficulty of survival during the severe winters is the cause of this.

Among small game in that part of the Dhaoladhar visited by me pheasants are abundant, especially the Kalij (*Gennaues hamiltoni*), known locally as the jungli murgha from its great likeness on the ground to the domestic bird. Both Koklas (*Cerionis macrolophus*) and Cheer (*Catreus wallichii*) are also found, and the monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*) is common above 9,000' (lower, of course, in the winter). The Black Partridge (*Francolinus francolinus*), as always, is in plenty below 8,000' where there is cultivation, and Chukor (*Alectoris graeca*) are met with on the open hillsides, the slopes to the north of the Nogli Gad below Darunghati in particular being renowned for them. The Tragopan, or Western Horned Pheasant (*Tragopan melanocephala*), a lovely bird, is certainly very rare, if indeed it can be found at all for I could get no information about it until I arrived at Manali, where Jija Rana, the king of the pheasants, is not so very uncommon. Nor could I collect any information about that fine bird, the Snowcock (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*), but, as it is to be found above the Baspa Valley, it may well be present on the high slopes of Hansbeshan.

Of the larger game the area holds seven species: Black Bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus*) is not rare in the thick forests above 8,000' though it descends much lower during the winter; Panther (*Panthera pardus*) is scarce but may be found as high as eight or nine thousand feet; kakkar or barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjac*), is not uncommon in jungle to 6,000'; Goral (*Nemorhaedus goral*) is fairly abundant in steep and rocky country to 7,500'; Thar (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*) inhabits forbidding crags below the snow line (those towards the upper end of the Nogli Valley near Taklech harbouring some fine heads); Musk Deer (*Moschus moschiferus*), which shares the name *kastura* with the Himalayan Whistling Thrush, is found in small numbers at high elevations, ranging as far as, and possibly beyond, Narkanda, and the Serow (*Capricornus sumatraensis*), locally called *emmoo*, a scarce animal throughout the North-west Himalaya, is occasionally met with in the thick cover of remote nalas above 7,000'.

Red Bear (*Ursus arctos*), Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*), Ibex (*Capra siberica*) and Bharal (*Sendois nahoar*) do not appear to be found on this side of the Sutlej any nearer than the mountains above the Baspa Valley, and, to the west, between the Great Himalayan Range and the Dhaoladhar. Beyond Sarahan, in the Sutlej Gorge, panthers are common along the trade route, preying on the flocks of sheep and goats that pass through in spring and autumn. As nian (*Ovis ammon*

*hodgsoni*), the great Tibetan sheep, is mentioned in the Himachal Pradesh game licence, one assumes that this animal may occasionally be found on the Tibet border. It is certainly found no nearer.

As for the future of the game of the high hills it is pleasant, in these days when the game of India is fast vanishing from so many parts of the sub-continent, to be able to state that it seems to be in little danger from man. Indeed there is less licensed shooting than in years gone by, though this is not of necessity a good thing as such shooting keeps some sort of check on predatory species. In fact I heard it reliably voiced in Manali that the numbers of game there had decreased for this very reason.

It must not, however, be thought that I had discovered an unnatural area where poaching is unknown. Far from it! On the contrary I should say that the incidence of potential poachers is very high indeed.

One of the advantages of a non-official conducting enquiries of this nature is that he can hear much that is not for official ears. The hillmen are not reticent and I certainly found this to be so. Almost without exception they have an intense interest in sport and a very sound knowledge of the habits of local game, so who can blame them for supplementing their meagre food supplies with the occasional pheasant or kakkar in a region where the isolation of the villages and difficulty of the country make it impossible to enforce the game laws with any measure of success? My rifle and shotgun always aroused great interest and nearly always a request that we go out shooting at the earliest possible moment, irrespective of whether I had a licence, or whether what they wished me to shoot was in season or not. However, they themselves possess so few guns and so thick is the forest that what they do shoot (or trap) can really cause little harm to the general stock. These remarks, of course, refer in the main only to small game. With the big game found at high altitudes the position is different. Few of these can normally be shot without a rifle, a weapon that the hillman naturally does not possess, and in addition they are protected by the great difficulties of the country they inhabit. I am certain that the poaching of these animals is, on the whole, negligible. Musk deer, nevertheless, the killing of which is entirely prohibited, are frequently shot for the valuable musk pouch.

An interesting sidelight on the difficulties of shooting game in the high hills was provided at Pulga in the Parbati Valley, an ideal headquarters for this kind of sport. A very ancient shikari showed me his testimonials dating from the earliest years of the century. He had taken out many people, almost all of whom had seen ibex, or bharal, or red bear or tahr (except one irritated individual who wrote that he had failed to see 'any buck'), but how few had shot anything at all.

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At Bahli I spent the late afternoon in the company of the beat guard and the local bania in the exhausting and unsuccessful pursuit of kakkar. The bania, however, a keen shikari, on our return promised to get me a pheasant early next morning if I would lend him my gun. This I did, and he duly turned up with three kalij, one of which I presented to him for his trouble, threw in a couple of cartridges for

luck and set out through the forest for Taklech. But I had not gone more than a mile when I was surprised to hear the sound of someone galloping after me on a pony. It was the bania. He had forgotten to collect three annas for firewood.

The weather deteriorated soon after my arrival at Taklech. As it is a pleasant sheltered place at a mere 5,000 ft. I decided to halt there over the next day to give the storm time to work itself out.

The beat guard at Taklech was an even keener shikari than his colleague at Bahli, and I allowed him to arrange a goral shoot for the morrow.

That afternoon did much to persuade me that shooting in the hills is an overrated sport!

It was already raining when we set out, and as the way at the start led through fields of standing barley I became soaking wet from the first. We then proceeded at great speed (it must be realised that I had not yet got my hill legs) up a remarkably steep and slippery path that crossed a number of nasty ledges, and awkward places where the track had been obliterated by landslides. Having climbed several thousand feet we plunged down a precipitous and treacherous hillside on which I was in imminent danger of losing my foothold and disappearing down into the Nogli Gad which appeared from this height to be a mere silver thread, until, at last, we came to rest in a narrow cleft on the face of a precipice overlooking a great sloping wall of rock across which the animals were expected to pass, it was confidently asserted, at any moment. It was still raining heavily, but, ever and anon, by way of variety, this changed to sleet. It was thundering loudly and incessantly, and some of the flashes were sufficiently close to make me seriously alarmed that our gun barrels might serve as lightning conductors. There was a bitter wind blowing from the snows and I grew colder and colder. The beat guard and his assistant, whom these vagaries of the weather appeared to leave unmoved, chattered to me cheerfully. They seemed to have a variety of grievances. But though an hour passed no goral appeared. At last, when I could no longer prevent streams of icy cold water pouring down my neck, I conveyed to them in my halting Hindi that I was returning to the bungalow to avoid frostbite. They chose to take my gun and rifle and proceed further in pursuit of the animals.

It was during my return that I hurt a toe of my left foot, an injury that made walking a painful matter for some days and brought about the change in my plans. Though I could walk uphill with a certain measure of comfort, to go downhill was extremely painful, except in my tennis shoes which eased the discomfort considerably. However, a further calamity occurred the next morning. All that night rain fell torrentially, with snow down to 8,000 ft., but dawn broke brilliantly fine though bitterly cold, so cold that I told the servant to light my fire. As I lay in bed drinking tea I thought I smelt burning rubber. Then I was sure of it, and, peering round, I saw that the left foot of my tennis shoes which had been placed in front of the fire to dry, was completely enveloped in flames.

This was serious, but, as the descent to the Nogli Gad is a short one and the rest of the way to Darunghati is all steeply uphill, I felt I could just manage it. So bidding farewell to the fine hill dog which

and firmly attached himself to me, I set off. The day remained cool and very fine, and in spite of my gloomy prognostications I made short, though painful, work of the five thousand foot climb.

Notwithstanding the glorious views of the mountains, and Hansheshan in particular, my halt at Darunghati was a miserable one. Snow was lying round the bungalow, it was unpleasantly cold and all the wood was so wet that it was impossible to make a satisfactory fire. I retired early to my 'sleeping bag'—a bedding roll, a rezaï with tapes attached so that it can be tied round the body, and one or two blankets make an excellent substitute.

Just before leaving I shot a cock cheer pheasant for my evening meal and the reverberating echoes revived sad memories, for this was the triple echo at which Sheba, now, alas! no more, had barked with such indignation four years ago.

The morning was fine and warm when I hobbled off down the hill towards Gaora, and the forest was coming to life. The grating note of the nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*) and the plaintive and unceasing wail of the great Himalayan barbet (*Megalaima virens*) were to be heard everywhere. Both are inhabitants of the treetops and adept at keeping out of sight, the first a dark bird of the crow family with much white in the tail, and the second a large and handsome green barbet with a blue-black head. Common sounds too were the wild song of the kastura (*Myiophoneus caeruleus*), a frequenter of forest aalas and streams, whose dark plumage is transmuted to glistening blue by the magic of the sunlight, and the mellow tri-syllabic note of the Black-and-Yellow Grosbeak (*Perissospiza icteroides*), a restless bird that lives among the middle branches of the conifers and repeatedly moves from tree to tree. Once too I heard the call of the Indian Cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus*), later on a very common sound, translated in the books by the extraordinary phrase 'kyphul pakka'! Lower down, where the road leaves the forest, much in evidence was the clear loud whistle of the Streaked Laughing-thrush (*Trochalopteron lineatum*) and the explosive 'Tseeee-tsewe' of the Brown Hill-Warbler (*Suya criniger*) as he sat on the topmost twig of some bush, ever and anon flying up to perform curious little evolutions in the sheer exuberance of living.

Just before Mashnu I turned down the Gaora link and for the first time entered country that was new to me. The road skirts the forest and there were glorious views up the Sutlej Valley of the high mountains freshly covered with snow.

Six miles out I met a young goatherd who made the surprising request that I employ him as a cook, and at nine miles I had my first quarrel with the Survey of India, the first of many. As a result of some cartographer's error I landed up at a rest house two and a half miles short of Gaora and waited there for a good hour before I learnt of my mistake. By that time the mules had by-passed me and reached their rightful destination. The map has compromised over these two bungalows by putting the symbol R.H. half way between them.

When finally I reached Gaora (not marked on the map) I found the rest house to be a bleak little building right above the Sutlej. It was, however, warm, and at last I was able to have a much needed bath.

The road from Gaora to Rampur is easily graded so the nine mile descent of 4,000 ft. was not too impossible to my poor foot. The spring

movement up the valley had begun and I met repeated herds of sheep and goats carrying their little packs, ponies, donkeys and mules in the charge of a heterogeny of different peoples and races—Tibetans, Spiti wallahs, Kunawaris and others, a picturesque collection, especially the pony dealers from Spiti and Tibet. Several encampments of these were to be seen by the wayside with their neat, rather flat, stream-lined tents, each ornamented with a tuft of yaks' tails, and a standard bearing fluttering prayer flags placed nearby.

Rampur, situated where the valley narrows between bare and ugly hillsides, is a squalid collection of tumbled-down houses dominated by the palace which may perhaps best be described as an elegant building in the hill style. The chief market for the trade of the Hindustan-Tibet road, Rampur is of interest as a meeting place of many races, and is famed for its pony fair in the autumn.

The rest house, a large and comfortable one, is a mile further down the Sulej.

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The path between Rampur and Banjar over the Bashleo Pass, although seldom used, is an excellent mule track and is kept in good condition.

Having found out that the pass was open, we left Rampur early on May 5th, crossed the Sulej and climbed into the steep valley opposite to the town. The going was hot and exhausting and we had 4,000 ft. to climb up an unshaded hillside. My young Goan servant, bearing in mind that before he made this trip he had seen no hills higher than the Western Ghats nor experienced any cold more intense than the mild Rajkot winter, had so far stood up to conditions well, but this day he was in a state of some exhaustion by the time we reached the top.

So far butterflies had been very scarce, which was not surprising in view of the bad weather, and I had seen no species of any interest at all, until half way up this hillside at 5,500 ft. I saw the handsome red-bodied swallowtail, *Polydorus philoxenus*, known as the Common Windmill from the appearance of its extended wings, beating up and down the bushes with the characteristic slow flight of its genus. Previously I had known of only one record of this butterfly from the Simla region—a strange fact, for it is common on the other side of the Bashleo Pass and also to the east of Himachal Pradesh. Some local disaster, which did not touch the species to the east and the west, has perhaps reduced the stock to vanishing point in the Simla Hills, much as I have suggested elsewhere (Vol. 48. No. 2) may account for the strange distribution of the Lepcha Bush-brown (*Mycalesis lepcha*) which is found on most of the hills of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Southern India but not in the Nilgiris.

We crossed the hilltop at a little pass close to the village of Sohach, where the map places the rest house, only to find that it was another two miles further up the Kurpan Valley at Arsu. As we were told there was another bungalow at Nermand in the opposite direction, the cartographer once again seems to have adopted the expedient of making one symbol do the work of two by placing it half way between them.



Mule train crossing the Bashleo Pass.



Photos

Author

Gushu Pishu (18,610') (right centre) and Kokshane (18,940') (right) from near Darunghati.





Manali—'The End of the Journey.'



*Photos*

*Author*

Himalayan Griffon Vulture.

Nermand is famous for its *mela*, at which in days gone by, so I am told, a rope festival was celebrated. This was a kind of sacrifice to ensure the fertility of the crops. A rope was secured between a precipice and the ground at its foot so that it stretched at a steep angle, and a suitable person, a criminal or one who had seriously offended against village custom, was chosen to ride down it on a forked piece of wood the shape of a 'Y'. The top ends of the Y were placed downwards over the rope and weighted to keep them in position, while the victim clung onto the upright with his hands and to the two arms of the 'Y' with his legs. If friction caused the rope to catch on fire and he fell to the ground below and was killed he and his apparel were torn to pieces and planted in the fields. If, however, he survived, this usually only happened to his clothes.

Aršu rest house is a little one-roomed shack, and I devoted the afternoon to washing my clothes in a neighbouring stream. There was a good view of the Bashleo Pass from the verandah of the bungalow, and very forbidding it looked. I began to wonder if it would be possible to get the mules over it.

However, when I questioned Chenan Singh, my very efficient Sikh muleteer, before setting off for Sirhan the next day, he had no qualms and assured me that it would be an easy matter.

Beyond Aršu the road drops two thousand feet, gently at first, then steeply, down to the Kurpan bridge at four miles. The way led through scrub and cultivation, typical of the southern hill slopes at this altitude—standing barley and a young growth of potatoes, oaks (*Quercus incana*) badly stripped for firewood, wild apricot trees (*Prunus armenica*), roses, *Indigofera* and bushes of *Berberis*, *Rhamnus*, *Spiraea*, *Cotoneaster* and *Crataegus*. Beside the river-crossing an alder tree was almost hidden under a mass of the yellow spikes of *Caesalpinia sepiaria*, a scandent shrub whose limit according to Collet's 'Flora Simlensis' is only 4,000 ft. Nevertheless, as I also found it two days later beyond Bathā flourishing at 6,500 ft. it is obvious that its normal range is much higher than that.

I had heard much of the beauty of the Kulu women but it disappointed me to observe that, after leaving Rampur, the nearer I approached that fortunate valley the more ill-favoured and surly became the inhabitants. Round Aršu they belonged to a positively Simian type, and truth compels me to observe that a large proportion of the population seemed to have a mental development in keeping with their appearance. Once over the Bashleo Pass, however, there was a sudden and pleasing change for the better, both in appearance and manners.

Such local peculiarities of physiognomy are a noticeable feature of the north-west Himalaya. I remember once halting at the village of Deha in Balsan State where all the men are extremely tall and thin and have remarkably small heads and a most decided resemblance one to another, their features being quite unlike those of any others I had met in the Simla Hills or, indeed, anywhere else. Again, for example, the difference in appearance between the natives of Kulu and Manali, and those of the neighbouring Parbatī Valley is most striking.

Beyond the Kurpan the track climbs steeply from woods of *Pinus longifolia* to enter the short valley leading up to the pass. A Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) glided past a few yards below me, giving

me the closest view I have ever had of this magnificent bird, and further up, at 7,500 ft., I saw a six-bar Swordtail butterfly (*Graphium eurous cashmiriensis*), a sign of the lateness of the season, for this extremely local *Papilio* appears with great regularity at this altitude in the Simla Hills about April 15th.

After entering the little valley the path climbs gently through pleasing scenery, mixed forest, cultivation and scrub, to give way to a steep and unpleasant ascent that winds in and out among the huge unshaded boulders of the terminal moraine of an ancient glacier that once flowed down from the head of the valley.

There was, however, ample compensation for this tedious climb, for on reaching the upper end of the moraine a scene of great beauty suddenly revealed itself. A square half mile of flat green pasture, on which grazed the tiny hill cattle, lies enclosed on three sides by huge cliffs and steep forested hillsides to form a cirque, and at the head of the pasture a stream tumbles down the crags to meander peacefully across the meadow past a little wooden temple.

When I arrived the chowkidar was absent from the bungalow, which is disappointingly placed to face away from the cirque, but an elderly crone who was minding cattle came to my rescue by emitting a series of eldritch shrieks in the direction of the village, three quarters of a mile away, which brought the chowkidar hurrying in a very short time.

The art of shouting from khudside to khudside has been highly developed in these parts, among whose simple folk it may almost be said to take the place of the telephone. I know of no place where it has been developed to a finer art than at Deha, the village mentioned a few paragraphs back, for there the inhabitants carry on conversations with the next village down the narrow funnel-shaped valley, fully two miles away. The replies float up from below, mere whispers of sound. Curiously enough this form of communication does not seem to be much in use in Kulu.

On opening one of my food boxes a scorpion was found (I think it had made the journey from Taklech where we had found another one) but otherwise the afternoon passed uneventfully and pleasantly among these delightful surroundings. Nevertheless, the pass looked even more forbidding from close quarters. It seemed to zig-zag up an almost vertical precipice.

The weather was gloomy when we set out the next morning, but, after a shower of rain, it cleared up to become brilliantly fine once more. Chenan Singh proved to be correct and the ascent of the pass was easy. Thirty-four cleverly engineered zig-zags take the road up the precipitous head of the valley. Then, at a gentler angle, it passes through a conifer belt onto meadow land and finally through a strip of mountain oak (*Quercus semecarpifolia*) to the summit.

The Bashleo, though a low pass—it is 10,800 ft.—is almost all that a pass should be, for it looks impressive from a distance, it is steep, it passes over a col between two high mountains, it is sufficiently high to be interesting, the ascent from Sirhan is not long enough to be tiring and there is a fine view back from the top, though the view towards Kulu is disappointing as it looks towards the lower hills.